Dancing to Ganam

Ursula K. Le Guin

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Dancing to Ganam
    - Dancing to Ganam

Dancing to Ganam
Ursula K. Le Guin

Dancing to Ganam

"Power is the great drumming," Aketa said. "The thunder. The noise of the waterfall that makes the electricity. It fills you till there's no room for anything else."

Ket poured a few drops of water onto the ground, murmuring, "Drink, traveler." She sprinkled pollen meal over the ground, murmuring, "Eat, traveler." She looked up at Iyananam, the mountain of power. "Maybe he only listened to the thunder, and couldn't hear anything else," she said. "Do you think he knew what he was doing?"

"I think he knew what he was doing," Aketa said.

Since the successful though problematic transilience of the *Shoby* to and from a nasty little planet called M-60-340-nolo, a whole wing of Ve Port had been given over to churten technology. The originators of churten theory on Anarres and the engineers of transilience on Urras communicated constantly by ansible with the theorists and engineers on Ve, who set up experiments and investigations designed to find out what, in fact, happened when a ship and its crew went from one place in the universe to another without taking any time at all to do so. "You cannot say 'went,' you cannot say 'happened,'" the Cetians chided, "It is here not there in one moment and in that same moment it is there not here. The non-interval is called, in our language, churten."

Interlocking with these circles of Cetian temporalists were circles of Hainish psychologists, investigating and arguing about what, in fact, happened when intelligent life-forms experienced the churten. "You cannot say 'in fact,' you cannot say 'experienced,'" they chided. "The reality point of 'arrival' for a churten crew is obtained by mutual perception-comparison and adjustment, so that for thinking beings construction of event is essential to effective transilience," and so on, and on, for the Hainish have been talking for a million years and have never got tired of it. But they are also fond of listening, and they listened to what the crew of the *Shoby* had to tell them. And when Commander Dalzul arrived, they listened to him.

"You have to send one man alone," he said. "The problem is interference. There were ten people on the *Shoby*. Send one man. Send me."

"You ought to go with Shan," Betton said.

His mother shook her head.

"It's dumb not to go!"

"If they don't want you, they don't get me," she said.

The boy knew better than to hug her, or say anything much. But he did something he seldom did: he made a joke. “You’d be back in no time,” he said.

“Oh, get along,” Tai said.

Shan knew that the Hainish did not wear uniforms and did not use status indicators such as “Commander.” But he put on his black-and-silver uniform of the Terran Ekumen to meet Commander Dalzul.

Born in the barracks of Alberta in the earliest years of Terra’s membership in the Ekumen, Dalzul took a degree in temporal physics at the University of A-Io on Urras and trained with the Stabiles on Hain before returning to his native planet as a Mobile of the Ekumen of the Worlds. During the sixty-seven years of his near-lightspeed journey, a troublesome religious movement escalated into the horrors of the Unist Revolution. Dalzul got the situation under control within months, by a combination of acumen and tactics that won him the respect of those he worked for, and the worship of those he had worked against—for the Unist Fathers decided he was God. The worldwide slaughter of unbelievers devolved into a worldwide novena of adoration of the New Manifestation, before devolving further into schisms and sects intent mainly on killing one another. Dalzul had defused the worst resurgence of theocratic violence since the Time of Pollution. He had acted with grace, with wit, with patience, reliability, resilience, trickiness, and good humor, with all the means the Ekumen most honored.

As he could not work on Terra, being prey to deification, he was given obscure but significant tasks on obscure but significant planets; one of them was Orint, the only world from which the Ekumen had yet withdrawn. They did so on Dalzul’s advice, shortly before the Orintians destroyed sentient life on their world by the use of pathogens in war. Dalzul had foretold the event with terrible and compassionate accuracy. He had set up the secret, last-minute rescue of a few thousand children whose parents were willing to let them go; Dalzul’s Children, these last of the Orintians were called.

Shan knew that heroes were phenomena of primitive cultures; but Terra’s culture was primitive, and Dalzul was his hero.

Tai read the message from Ve Port with disbelief. “What kind of crew is that?” she said. “Who asks parents to leave their kid?”

Then she looked up at Shan, and saw his face.

“It’s Dalzul,” he said. “He wants us. In his crew.”

“Go,” Tai said.

He argued, of course, but Tai was on the hero’s side. He went. And for the reception at which he was to meet Dalzul, he wore the black uniform with the silver thread down the sleeves and the one

silver circle over the heart.

The commander wore the same uniform. When he saw him Shan's heart leaped and thudded. Inevitably, Dalzul was shorter than Shan had imagined him: he was not three meters tall. But otherwise he was as he should be, erect and lithe, the long, light hair going grey pulled back from a magnificent, vivid face, the eyes as clear as water. Shan had not realized how white-skinned Dalzul was, but the deformity or atavism was minor and could even be seen as having its own beauty. Dalzul's voice was warm and quiet; he laughed as he talked to a group of excited Anarresti. He saw Shan, turned, came straight to him. "At last! You're Shan, I'm Dalzul, we're shipmates. I am truly sorry your partner couldn't be one of us. But her replacements are old friends of yours, I think—Forest and Riel."

Shan was delighted to see the two familiar faces, Forest's an obsidian knife with watchful eyes, Riel's round and shining as a copper sun. He had been in training on Ollul with them. They greeted him with equal pleasure. "This is wonderful," he said, and then, "So we're all Terrans?"—a stupid question, since the fact was obvious; but the Ekumen generally favored mixing cultures in a crew.

"Come on out of this," Dalzul said, "and I'll explain." He signaled a mezklete, which trotted over, proudly pushing a little cart laden with drinks and food. They filled trays, thanked the mezklete, and found themselves a deep windowseat well away from the noisy throng. There they sat and ate and drank and talked and listened. Dalzul did not try to hide his passionate conviction that he was on the right track to solve the "churten problem."

"I've gone out twice alone," he said. He lowered his voice slightly as he spoke, and Shan began naively, "Without—?" and stopped.

Dalzul grinned. "No, no. With the permission of the Churten Research Group. But not really with their blessing. That's why I tend to whisper and look over my shoulder. There are still some CRG people here who make me feel as if I'd stolen their ship—scoffed at their theories—violated their shifgrethor—peed on their shoes—even after the ship and I round-tripped with no churten problems, no perceptual dissonances at all."

"Where?" Forest asked, blade-sharp face intent.

"First trip, inside this system, from Ve to Hain and back. A bus trip. Everything known, expectable. It was absolutely without incident—as expected. I'm here: I'm there. I leave the ship to check in with the Stabiles, get back in the ship, and I'm here. Hey presto! It is magic, you know. And yet it seems so natural. Where one is, one is. Did you feel that, Shan?"

The clear eyes were amazing in their intensity. It was like being looked at by lightning. Shan wanted to be able to agree, but had to

stammer, “I—we, you know, we had some trouble deciding where we were.”

“I think that that’s unnecessary, that confusion. Transilience is a non-experience. I think that normally, *nothing happens*. Literally nothing. Extraneous events got mixed into it in the *Shoby* experiment —your interval was queered. This time, I think we can have a non-experience.” He looked at Forest and Riel and laughed. “You’ll not-see what I don’t mean,” he said. “Anyhow, after the bus trip, I hung about annoying them persistently until Gvonesh agreed to let me do a solo exploratory.”

The mezklete bustled up to them, pushing its little cart with its furry paws. Mezkletes love parties, love to give food, love to serve drinks and watch their humans get weird. It stayed about hopefully for a while to see if they would get weird, then bustled back to the Anarresti theorists, who were always weird.

“An exploratory—a first contact?”

Dalzul nodded. His strength and unconscious dignity were daunting, and yet his delight, his simple glee, in what he had done was irresistible. Shan had met brilliant people and wise people, but never one whose energy shone so bright, so clear, so vulnerable.

“We chose a distant one. G-14-214-yomo; it was Tadkla on the maps of the Expansion; the people I met there call it Ganam. A preliminary Ekumen mission is actually on its way there at NAFAL speed. Left Ollul eight years ago, and will get there thirteen years from herenow. Of course there was no way to communicate with them while they’re in transit, to tell them I was going to be there ahead of them. The CRG thought it a good idea that somebody would be dropping in after thirteen years. In case I didn’t report back, maybe they could find out what happened. But it looks now as if the mission will arrive to find Ganam already a member of the Ekumen!” He looked at them all, alight with passion and intention. “You know, churten is going to change everything. When transilience replaces space travel—all travel—when there is no distance between worlds—when we control interval—I keep trying to imagine, to understand what it will mean, to the Ekumen, to us. We’ll be able to make the household of humankind truly one house, one place. But then it goes still deeper! In transilience what we do is to rejoin, restore the primal moment, the beat that is the rhythm…To rejoin unity. To escape time. To use eternity! You’ve been there, Shan—you felt what I’m trying to say?”

“I don’t know,” Shan said, “yes—”

“Do you want to see the tape of my trip?” Dalzul asked abruptly, his eyes shining with a flicker of mischief. “I brought a handview.”

“Yes!” Forest and Riel said, and they crowded in around him in

the windows eat like a bunch of conspirators. The mezklete tried in vain to see what they were doing, but was too short, even when it got up on its cart.

While he programmed the little viewer, Dalzul told them briefly about Ganam. One of the outermost seedings of the Hainish Expansion, the world had been lost from the human community for five hundred millennia; nothing was known about it except that it might have a population descended from human ancestors. If it did, the Ekumenical ship on its way to it would in the normal way have observed from orbit for a long time before sending down a few observers, to hide, or to pass if possible, or to reveal their mission if necessary, while gathering information, learning languages and customs, and so on—a process usually of many years. All this had been short-circuited by the unpredictability of the new technology. Dalzul's small ship had come out of churten not in the stratosphere as intended, but in the atmosphere, about a hundred meters above the ground.

"I didn't have the chance to make an unobtrusive entrance on the scene," he said. The audiovisual record his ship's instruments had made came up on the little screen as he spoke. They saw the grey plains of Ve Port dropping away as the ship left the planet. "Now," Dalzul said, and in one instant they saw the stars blaze in black space and the yellow walls and orange roofs of a city, the blaze of sunlight on a canal.

"You see?" Dalzul murmured. "Nothing happens."

The city tilted and settled, sunny streets and squares full of people, all of them looking up and pointing, unmistakably shouting, "Look! Look!"

"Decided I might as well accept the situation," Dalzul said. Trees and grass rose up around the ship as he brought it on down. People were already hurrying out of the city, human people: terra-cotta-colored, rather massively built, with broad faces, bare-armed, barefoot, wearing kilts and gilets in splendid colors, men with great gold earrings, headdresses of basketry, gold wire, feather plumes.

"The Gaman," Dalzul said. "The people of Ganam…Grand, aren't they? And they don't waste time. They were there within half an hour —there, that's Ket, see her, that stunning woman?—Since the ship was obviously fairly alarming, I decided that the first point to make was my defenselessness."

They saw what he meant, as the ship's camera recorded his exit. He walked slowly out on the grass and stood still, facing the gathering crowd. He was naked. Unarmed, unclothed, alone, he stood there, the fierce sun bright on his white skin and silvery hair, his hands held wide and open in the gesture of offering.

The pause was very long. Talk and exclamation among the Gaman died out as people came near the front of the crowd. Dalzul, in the center of the camera's field, stood easily, motionless. Then—Shan drew breath sharply as he watched—a woman came forward towards him. She was tall and strongly built, with round arms, black eyes above high cheekbones. Her hair was braided with gold into a coronet on her head. She stood before Dalzul and spoke, her voice clear and full. The words sounded like poetry, like ritual questions, Shan thought. Dalzul responded by bringing his hands toward his heart, then opening them again wide, palm up.

The woman gazed at him a while, then spoke one resonant word. Slowly, with a grave formality, she slipped the dark red gilet from her breasts and shoulders, untied her kilt and dropped it aside with a splendid, conscious gesture, and stood naked before the naked man.

She reached out her hand. Dalzul took it.

They walked away from the ship, towards the city. The crowd closed in behind them and followed them, still quiet, without haste or confusion, as if performing actions they had performed before.

A few people, mostly adolescents, stayed behind, looking at the ship, daring each other to come closer, curious, cautious, but not frightened.

Dalzul stopped the tape.

"You see," he said to Shan, "the difference?"

Shan, awed, did not speak.

"What the *Shoby*'s crew discovered," Dalzul said to the three of them, "is that individual experiences of transilience can be made coherent only by a concerted effort. An effort to synchronize—to entrain. When they realized that, they were able to pull out of an increasingly dangerously fragmented perception of where they were and what was happening. Right, Shan?"

"They call it the chaos experience now," Shan said, subdued by the memory of it, and by the difference of Dalzul's experience.

"The temporalists and psychologists have sweated a lot of theory out of the *Shoby* trip," Dalzul said. "My reading of it is pitifully simple: that a great deal of the perceptual dissonance, the anguish and incoherence, was an effect of the disparity of the *Shoby* crew. No matter how well you had crew-bonded, Shan, you were ten people from four worlds—four different cultures—two very old women, and three young children! If the answer to coherent transilience is entrainment, functioning in rhythm, then we've got to make entrainment easy. That you achieved it at all was miraculous. The simplest way to achieve it, of course, is to bypass it: to go alone."

"Then how do you get a cross-check on the experience?" Forest said.

"You just saw it: the ship's record of the landing."

"But our instruments on the *Shoby* went out, or were totally erratic," Shan said. "The readings are as incoherent as our perceptions were."

"Exactly! You and the instruments were all in one entrainment field, fouling each other up. But when just two or three of you went down onto the planet's surface, things were better: the lander functioned perfectly, and its tapes of the surface are clear. Although very ugly."

Shan laughed. "Ugly, yes. A sort of shit-planet. But, Commander, even on the tapes it never is clear who actually went out onto the surface. And that was one of the most chaotic parts of the whole experience. I went down with Gveter and Betton. The surface under the ship was unstable, so I called them back to the lander and we went back up to the ship. That all seems coherent. But Gveter's perception was that he went down with Betton and Tai, not me, heard Tai call him from the ship, and came back with Betton and me. As for Betton, he went down with Tai and me. He saw his mother walk away from the lander, ignore the order to return, and be left on the surface. Gveter saw that too. They came back without her and found her waiting for them on the bridge. Tai herself has no memory of going down in the lander. Those four stories are all our evidence. They seem to be equally true, equally untrue. And the tapes don't help—don't show who was in the suits. They all look alike in that shit soup on the surface."

"That's it—exactly—" Dalzul said, leaning forward, his face alight. "That murk, that shit, that chaos you saw, which the cameras in your field saw—Think of the difference between that and the tapes we just watched! Sunlight, vivid faces, bright colors, everything brilliant, clear—Because there was no interference, Shan. The Cetians say that in the churten field there is nothing but the deep rhythms, the vibration of the ultimate wave-particles. Transilience is a function of the rhythm that makes being. According to Cetian spiritual physics, it's access to that rhythm which allows the individual to participate in eternity and ubiquity. My extrapolation from that is that individuals in transilience have to be in nearly perfect synchrony to arrive at the same place with a harmonious—that is, an accurate—perception of it. My intuition, as far as we've tested it, has been confirmed: one person can churten sanely. Until we learn what we're doing, ten persons will inevitably experience chaos, or worse."

"And four persons?" Forest inquired, drily.

"—are the control," said Dalzul. "Frankly, I'd rather have started out by going on more solos, or with one companion at most. But our friends from Anarres, as you know, are very distrustful of what they

call egoizing. To them, morality isn't accessible to individuals, only to groups. Also, they say, maybe something else went wrong on the *Shoby* experiment, maybe a group can churten just as well as one person, how do we know till we try? So I compromised. I said, send me with two or three highly compatible and highly motivated companions. Send us back to Ganam and let's see what we see!"

"'Motivated' is inadequate," Shan said. "I am committed. I belong to this crew."

Riel was nodding, Forest, wary and saturnine, said only, "Are we going to practice entrainment, Commander?"

"As long as you like," Dalzul said. "But there are things more important than practice. Do you sing, Forest, or play an instrument?"

"I can sing," Forest said, and Riel and Shan nodded as Dalzul looked at them.

"You know this," he said, and began softly to sing an old song, a song everybody from the barracks and camps of Terra knew, "Going to the Western Sea." Riel joined in, then Shan, then Forest in an unexpectedly deep, resonant voice. A few people near them turned to hear the harmonies strike through the gabble of speaking voices. The mezklete came hurrying over, abandoning its cart, its eyes large and bright. They ended the song, smiling, on a long soft chord.

"That is entrainment," Dalzul said. "All we need to get to Ganam is music. All there is, in the end, is music."

Smiling, Forest and then Riel raised their glasses.

"To music!" said Shan, feeling drunk and wildly happy.

"To the crew of the *Galba*," said Dalzul, and they drank.

The minimum crew-bonding period of isyeye was of course observed, and during it they had plenty of time to discuss the churten problem, both with Dalzul and among themselves. They watched the ship's tapes and reread Dalzul's records of his brief stay on Ganam till they had them memorized, and then argued about the wisdom of doing so. "We're simply accepting everything he saw and said as objective fact," Forest pointed out. "What sort of control can we provide?"

"His report and the ship's tapes agree completely," Shan said.

"Because, if his theory is correct, he and the instruments were entrained. The reality of the ship and the instruments may be perceivable to us only as perceived by the person, the intelligent being, in transilience. If the Cetians are sure of one thing about churten, it's that when intelligence is involved in the process they don't understand it any more. Send out a robot ship, no problem. Send out amoebas and crickets, no problem. Send out high-intelligence beings and all the bets are off. Your ship was part of your reality—

your ten different realities. Its instruments obediently recorded the dissonances, or were affected by them to the point of malfunction and nonfunction. Only when you all worked together to construct a joint, coherent reality could the ship begin to respond to it and record it. Right?"

"Yes. But it's very difficult," Shan said, "to live without the notion that there is, somewhere, if one could just find it, a fact."

"Only fiction," said Forest, unrelenting. "Fact is one of our finest fictions."

"But music comes first," Shan said. "And dancing is people being music. I think what Dalzul sees is that we can…we can dance to Ganam."

"I like that," said Riel. "And look: on the fiction theory, we should be careful not to 'believe' Dalzul's records, or his ship's tapes. They're fictions. But, unless we accept the assumption, based only on the *Shoby* experiment, that the churten experience necessarily skews perception or judgment of perception, we have no reason to *dis*believe them. He's a seasoned observer and a superb gestalter."

"There are elements of a rather familiar kind of fiction in his report," Forest said. "The princess who has apparently been waiting for him, expecting him, and leads him naked to her palace, where after due ceremonies and amenities she has sex with him—and very good sex too—? I'm not saying I disbelieve it. I don't. It looks and rings true. But it would be interesting to know how the princess perceived these events."

"We can't know that till we get there and talk to her," said Riel. "What are we waiting for, anyhow?"

The *Galba* was a Hainish in-system glass ship, newly fitted with churten controls. It was a pretty little bubble, not much bigger than the *Shoby*'s lander. Entering it, Shan had a few rather bad moments. The chaos, the senseless and centerless experience of churten, returned vividly to him: must he go through that again? Could he? Very sharp and aching was the thought of Tai, Tai who should be here now as she had been there then, Tai whom he had come to love aboard the *Shoby*, and Betton, the clear-hearted child—he needed them, they should be here.

Forest and Riel slipped through the hatch, and after them came Dalzul, the concentration of his energy almost visible around him as an aura or halo, a brightness of being. No wonder the Unists thought he was God, Shan thought, and thought also of the ceremonial, almost reverent welcome shown Dalzul by the Gaman. Dalzul was charged, full of mana, a power to which others responded, by which they were entrained. Shan's anxiety slipped from him. He knew that with Dalzul

there would be no chaos.

"They thought we'd be able to control a bubble easier than the ship I had. I'll try not to bring her out right over the roofs this time. No wonder they thought I was a god, materializing in full view like that!" Shan had got used to the way Dalzul seemed to echo his thoughts, and Riel's and Forest's, and had come to expect it; they were in synchrony, it was their strength.

They took their places, Dalzul at the churten console, Riel plugged into the AI, Shan at the flight controls, and Forest as gestalt and Support. Dalzul looked round and nodded, and Shan took them out a few hundred kilometers from Ve Port. The curve of the planet fell away and the stars shone under his feet, around, above.

Dalzul began to sing, not a melody but a held note, a full, deep A. Riel joined in, an octave above, then Forest on the F between, and Shan found himself pouring out a steady middle C as if he were a church organ. Riel shifted to the C above, Dalzul and Forest sang the triad, and as the chord changed Shan did not know who sang which note, hearing and being only the sphere of the stars and the sweet frequencies swelling and fading in one long-held unison as Dalzul touched the console and the yellow sun was high in the blue sky above the city.

Shan had not stopped flying. Red and orange roofs, dusty plazas tilted under the ship. "How about over there, Shan," Dalzul said, pointing to a green strip by a canal, and Shan brought the *Galba* effortlessly down in a long glide and touched it onto grass, soft as a soap bubble.

He looked round at the others and out through the walls.

"Blue sky, green grass, near noon, natives approaching," said Dalzul. "Right?"

"Right," said Riel, and Shan laughed. No conflict of sensations, no chaos of perceptions, no terror of uncertainty, this time. "We churtened," he said. "We did it. We danced it!"

The field workers down by the canal got into a group and watched, evidently afraid to approach, but very soon people could be seen on the dusty road leading out from the city. "The welcoming committee, I trust," said Dalzul.

The four of them waited beside the bubble ship. The tension of the moment only heightened the extraordinary vividness of emotion and sensation. Shan felt that he knew the beautiful, harsh outlines of the two volcanoes that bounded the city's valley, knew them and would never forget them, knew the smell of the air and the fall of the light and the blackness of shadow under leaves; this is herenow, he said to himself with joyous certainty, I am herenow and there is no distance, no separation.

Tension without fear. Plumed and crested men, broad-chested and strong-armed, walked towards them steadily, their faces impassive, and stopped in front of them. One elderly man nodded his head slightly and said, “Sem Dazu.” Dalzul made the gesture from heart to open embrace, saying, “Viaka!” The other men said, “Dazu, Sem Dazu,” and some of them imitated Dalzul’s gesture.

“Viaka,” Dalzul said, “beya,”—friend—and he introduced his companions to them, repeating their names and the word friend.

“Foyes,” said old Viaka. “Shan. Yeh.” He knew he hadn’t come very close to “Riel,” and frowned slightly. “Friends. Be welcome. Come, come in Ganam.” During his brief first stay, Dalzul had not been able to record much of the language for the Hainish linguists to work on; from his meager tapes they and their clever analoguers had produced a little manual of vocabulary and grammar, full of [?]s, which Shan had dutifully studied. He remembered beya, and kiyugi, be welcome [?], be at home [?]. Riel, a hilfer/linguist, would have liked longer to study the manual. “Better to learn the language from the speakers,” Dalzul had said.

As they walked the dusty road to Ganam city the vividness of impression began to overload on Shan, becoming a blur and glory of heat and radiance, red and yellow clay walls, pottery-red bare breasts and shoulders, purple and red and orange and umber striped and embroidered cloaks and vests and kilts, the gleam of gold and nod of feathers, the smells of oil and incense and dust and smoke and food and sweat, the sounds of many voices, slap of sandals and sluff of bare feet on stone and earth, bells, gongs, the difference of light, the touch and smell and beat of a world where nothing was known and everything was as it was, as it should be, this little city of stone and mud and splendid carvings, fiery in the light of its gold sun, crude, magnificent, and human. It was stranger than anything Shan had known and it was as if he had been away and come home again. Tears blurred his eyes. We are all one, he thought. There is no distance, no time between us; all we need do is step across, and we are here, together. He walked beside Dalzul and heard the people greet him, grave and quiet: Sem Dazu, they said, Sem Dazu, kiyugi. You have come home.

The first days were all overload. There were moments when Shan thought that he had stopped thinking—was merely experiencing, receiving, not processing. “Process later,” Dalzul said with a laugh, when Shan told him. “How often does one get to be a child?” It was indeed like being a child, having no control over events and no responsibility for them. Expectable or incredible, they happened, and he was part of the happening and watched it happening at the same

time. They were going to make Dalzul their king. It was ridiculous and it was perfectly natural. Your king dies without an heir; a silver man drops out of your sky and your princess says, “This is the man”; the silver man vanishes and returns with three strange companions who can work various miracles; you make him king. What else can you do with him?

Riel and Forest were, of course, reluctant, dubious about so deep an involvement with a native culture, but had no alternative to offer Dalzul. Since the kingship was evidently more honorary than authoritative, they admitted that he had probably better go along with what the Gaman wanted. Trying to keep some perspective on Dalzul’s situation, they had separated themselves early on, living in a house near the market, where they could be with common people and enjoy a freedom of movement Dalzul did not have. The trouble with being king-to-be, he told Shan, was that he was expected to hang around the palace all day observing taboos.

Shan stayed with Dalzul. Viaka gave him one of the many wings of the rambling clay palace to himself. He shared it with a relative of Viaka’s wife called Abud, who helped him keep house. Nothing was expected of him, either by Dalzul or by his native hosts; his time was free. The CRG had asked them to spend thirty days in Ganam. The days flowed by like shining water. He tried to keep his journal for the Ekumen, but found he hated to break the continuity of experience by talking about it, analyzing it. The whole point was that nothing happened, he thought, smiling.

The only experience that stood out as in some way different was a day he spent with old Viaka’s niece [?] and her husband [?]—he had tried to get the kinship system straight, but the question marks remained, and for some reason this young couple seemed not to use their names. They took him on a long and beautiful walk to a waterfall up on the slope of the larger volcano, Iyananam. He understood that it was a sacred place they wanted him to see. He was very much surprised to find that the sacred waterfall was employed to power a sacred dynamo. The Gaman, as far as his companions could explain and he could understand, had a quite adequate grasp of the principles of hydroelectricity, though they were woefully short of conductors, and had no particular practical use for the power they generated. Their discussion seemed to be about the nature of electricity rather than the application of it, but he could follow very little of it. He tried to ask if there was any place they used electricity, but all he could say was, “somewhere come out?” At such moments he did not find it so agreeable to feel like a child, or a half-wit. Yes, the young woman said, it comes out at the ishkanem when the basemmiak vada. Shan nodded and made notes. Like all Gaman, his companions

enjoyed watching him talk into his noter and seeing the tiny symbols appear on the tiny screen, an amiable magic.

They took him onto a terrace built out from the little dynamo building, which was built of dressed stone laid in marvelously intricate courses. They tried to explain something, pointing downstream. He saw something shining in the quick glitter of the water, but could not make out what it was. Heda, taboo, they said, a word he knew well from Dalzul, though he had not himself run into anything heda till now. As they went on, he caught the name "Dazu" in their conversation with each other, but again could not follow. They passed a little earth shrine, where in the informal worship of the Gaman each of them laid a leaf from a nearby tree, and then set off down the mountainside in the long light of late afternoon.

As they rounded a turn of the steep trail, he could see in the hazy golden distance down the great valley two other settlements, towns or cities. He was surprised to see them, and then surprised by his surprise. He realized that he had been so absorbed in being in Ganam that he had forgotten it was not the only place in the world. Pointing, he asked his companions, "Belong Gaman?" After some discussion, probably of what on earth he meant, they said no, only Ganam belonged to the Gaman; those cities were other cities.

Was Dalzul, then, right in thinking the world was called Ganam, or did that name mean just the city and its lands? "Tegud ao? What you call?" he asked, patting the ground, sweeping his arms around the circle of valley, the mountain at their backs, the other mountain facing them. "Nanam tegudyeh," said Viaka's niece [?], tentatively, but her husband [?] disagreed, and they discussed it impenetrably for a mile or more. Shan gave up, put away his noter, and enjoyed the walk in the cool of the evening down towards the golden walls of Ganam.

The next day, or maybe it was the day after, Dalzul came by while Shan was pruning the fruit tree in the walled courtyard of his bit of the palace. The pruning knife was a thin, slightly curved steel blade with a gracefully carved, well-worn wooden handle; it was sharp as a razor. "This is a lovely tool," he said to Dalzul. "My grandmother taught me to prune. It's not an art I've been able to practice much since I joined the Ekumen. They're good orcharders here. I was out talking with some of them yesterday." Had it been yesterday? Not that it mattered. Time is not duration but intensity; time is the beat and the interval, Shan had been thinking as he studied the tree, learning the inner rhythm of its growth, the patterned intervals of its branches. The years are flowers, the worlds are fruit…"Pruning makes me poetical," he said, and then, looking at

Dalzul, said, “Is something wrong?” It was like a skipped pulse, a wrong note, a step mistaken in the dance.

“I don’t know,” Dalzul said. “Let’s sit down a minute.” They went to the shade under the balcony and settled down cross-legged on the flagstones. “Probably,” Dalzul said, “I’ve relied too far on my intuitive understanding of these people—followed my nose, instead of holding back, learning the language word by word, going by the book…I don’t know. But something is amiss.”

Shan watched the strong, vivid face as Dalzul spoke. The fierce sunlight had tanned his white skin to a more human color. He wore his own shirt and trousers, but had let his grey hair fall loose as Gaman men did, wearing a narrow headband interwoven with gold, which gave him a regal and barbaric look.

“These are a barbaric people,” he said. “More violent, more primitive perhaps, than I wanted to admit. This kingship they’re determined to invest me with—I’m afraid I have to see it as something more than an honor or a sacral gesture. It is political, after all. At least, it would seem that by being chosen to be king, I’ve made a rival. An enemy.”

“Who?”

“Aketa.”

“I don’t know him. He’s not in the palace here?”

“No. He’s not one of Viaka’s people. He seems to have been away when I first came. As I understand Viaka, this man considers himself the heir to the throne and the legitimate mate of the princess.”

“Princess Ket?” Shan had never yet spoken to the princess, who kept herself aloof, staying always in her part of the palace, though she allowed Dalzul to visit her there. “What does she say about this Aketa? Isn’t she on your side? She chose you, after all.”

“She says I am to be king. That hasn’t changed. But she has. She’s left the palace. In fact she’s gone to live, as well as I can tell, in this Aketa’s household! My God, Shan, is there any world in this universe where men can understand women?”

“Gethen,” Shan said.

Dalzul laughed, but his face remained intense, pondering. “You have a partner,” he said after a while. “Maybe that’s the answer. I never came to a place with a woman where I knew, really knew, what she wanted, who she was. If you stick it out, do you finally get there?”

Shan was touched at the older man, the brilliant man, asking him such questions. “I don’t know,” he said. “Tai and I—we know each other in a way that—But it’s not easy—I don’t know…But about the princess—Riel and Forest have been talking with people, learning the language. As women, maybe they’d have some insights?”

“Women yes and no,” Dalzul said. “It’s why I chose them, Shan.

With two real women, the psychological dynamics might have been too complicated."

Shan said nothing, feeling again that something was missing or he was missing something, misunderstanding. He wondered if Dalzul knew that most of Shan's sexuality had been with men until he met Tai.

"Consider," Dalzul said, "for instance, if the princess thought she should be jealous of one or both of them, thought they were my sexual partners. That could be a snake's nest! As it is, they're no threat. Of course, seeking consonance, I'd have preferred all men. But the Elders on Hain are mostly old women, and I knew I had to suit them. So I asked you and your partner, a married couple. When your partner couldn't come, these two seemed the best solution. And they've performed admirably. But I don't think they're equipped to tell me what's going on in the mind, or the hormones, of a very fully sexed woman such as the princess."

The beat skipped again. Shan rubbed one hand against the rough stone of the terrace, puzzled at his own sense of confusion. Trying to return to the original subject, he asked, "If it is a political kingship, not a sacral one, can you possibly—just withdraw your candidacy, as it were?"

"Oh, it's sacred. The only way I could withdraw is to run away. Churten back to Ve Port."

"We could fly the *Galba* to another part of the planet," Shan suggested. "Observe somewhere else."

"From what Viaka tells me, leaving's not really an option. Ket's defection has apparently caused a schism, and if Aketa gains power, his supporters will wreak vengeance on Viaka and all his people. Blood sacrifice for offense to the true and sacred king's person… Religion and politics! How could I of all men be so blind? I let my longings persuade me that we'd found a rather primitive idyll. But what we're in the middle of here is a factional and sexual competition among intelligent barbarians who keep their pruning hooks and their swords extremely sharp." Dalzul smiled suddenly, and his light eyes flashed. "They are wonderful, these people. They are everything we lost with our literacy, our industry, our science. Directly sensual—utterly passionate—primally real. I love them. If they want to make me their king, then by God I'll put a basket of feathers on my head and be their king! But before that, I've got to figure out how to handle Aketa and his crew. And the only key to Aketa seems to be our moody Princess Ket. Whatever you can find out, tell me, Shan. I need your advice and your help."

"You have it, sir," Shan said, touched again. After Dalzul had left, he decided that what he should do was what Dalzul's unexpected

male-heterosexual defensiveness prevented him from doing: go ask advice and help of Forest and Riel.

He set off for their house. As he made his way through the marvelously noisy and aromatic market, he asked himself when he had seen them last, and realized it had been several days. What had he been doing? He had been in the orchards. He had been up on the mountain, on Iyananam, where there was a dynamo…where he had seen other cities…The pruning hook was steel. How did the Gaman make their steel? Did they have a foundry? Did they get it in trade? His mind was sluggishly, laboriously turning over these matters as he came into the courtyard, where Forest sat on a cushion on the terrace, reading a book.

"Well," she said. "A visitor from another planet!"

It had been quite a long time since he had been here—eight, ten days?

"Where've you been?" he asked, confused.

"Right here. Riel!" Forest called up to the balcony. Several heads looked over the carved railing, and the one with curly hair said, "Shan! I'll be right down!"

Riel arrived with a pot of tipu seeds, the ubiquitous munchy of Ganam. The three of them sat around on the terrace, half in the sun and half out of it, and cracked seeds; typical anthropoids, Riel remarked. She greeted Shan with real warmth, and yet she and Forest were unmistakably cautious: they watched him, they asked nothing, they waited to see…what? How long had it been, then, since he had seen them? He felt a sudden tremor of unease, a missed beat so profound that he put his hands flat on the warm sandstone, bracing himself. Was it an earthquake? Built between two sleepy volcanoes, the city shuddered a little now and then, bits of clay fell off the walls, little orange tiles off the roofs Forest and Riel watched him. Nothing was shaking, nothing was falling.

"Dalzul has run into some kind of problem in the palace," he said.

"Has he," said Forest in a perfectly neutral tone.

"A native claimant to the throne, a pretender or heir, has turned up, And the princess is staying with him, now. But she still tells Dalzul that he's to be king. If this pretender gets power, apparently he threatens reprisals against all Viaka's people, anybody who backed Dalzul. It's just the kind of sticky situation Dalzul was hoping to avoid."

"And is matchless at resolving," said Forest.

"I think he feels pretty much at an impasse. He doesn't understand what role the princess is playing. I think that troubles him most. I thought you might have some idea why, after more or less hurling herself into his arms, she's gone off to stay with his rival."

"It's Ket you're talking about," Riel said, cautious.

"Yes. He calls her the princess. That's not what she is?"

"I don't know what Dalzul means by the word. It has a lot of connotations. If the denotation is 'a king's daughter,' then it doesn't fit. There is no king."

"Not at present—"

"Not ever," Forest said.

Shan suppressed a flash of anger. He was getting tired of being the half-wit child, and Forest could be abrasively gnomic. "Look," he said, "I—I've been sort of out of it. Bear with me. I thought their king was dead. And given Dalzul's apparently miraculous descent from heaven during the search for a new king, they saw him as divinely appointed, 'the one who will hold the scepter.' Is that all wrong?"

"Divinely appointed seems to be right," Riel said. "These are certainly sacred matters." She hesitated and looked at Forest. They worked as a team, Shan thought, but not, at the moment, a team that included him. What had become of the wonderful oneness?

"Who is this rival, this claimant?" Forest asked him.

"A man named Aketa."

"Aketa!"

"You know him?"

Again the glance between the two; then Forest turned to face him and looked directly into his eyes. "Shan," she said, "we are seriously out of sync. I wonder if we're having the churten problem. The chaos experience you had on the *Shoby*."

"Here, now? When we've been here for days, weeks—"

"Where's here?" Forest asked, serious and intent.

Shan slapped his hand on the flagstone. "Here! Now! In this courtyard of your house in Ganam! This is nothing like the chaos experience. We're sharing this—it's coherent, it's consonant, we're here together! Eating tipu seeds!"

"I think so too," Forest said, so gently that Shan realized she was trying to calm him, reassure him. "But we may be…reading the experience quite differently."

"People always do, everywhere," he said rather desperately.

She had moved so that he could see more clearly the book she had been reading when he came. It was an ordinary bound book, but they had brought no books with them on the *Galba*, a thick book on some kind of heavy brownish paper, hand-lettered, a Terran antique book from New Cairo Library, it was not a book but a pillow, a brick, a basket, not a book, it was a book. In a strange writing. In a strange language. A book with covers of carved wood, hinged with gold.

"What is that?" he asked almost inaudibly.

"The sacred history of the Cities Under Iyananam, we think,"

Forest said.

"A book," Riel said.

"They're illiterate," Shan said.

"Some of them are," said Forest.

"Quite a lot of them are, actually," said Riel. "But some of the merchants and the priests can read. Aketa gave us this. We've been studying with him. He's a marvelous teacher."

"He's a kind of scholar priest, we think," said Forest. "There are these positions, we're calling them priesthoods because they're basically sacred, but they're really more like jobs, or vocations, callings. Very important to the Gaman, to the whole structure of society, we think. They have to be filled; things go out of whack if they aren't. And if you have the vocation, the talent, you go out of whack if you don't do it, too. A lot of them are kind of occasional, like a person that officiates at an annual festival, but some of them seem to be really demanding, and very prestigious. Most of them are for men. Our feeling is that probably the way a man gets prestige is to fill one of the priesthoods."

"But men run the whole city," Shan protested.

"I don't know," Forest said, still with the uncharacteristic gentleness that told Shan he was not in full control. "We'd describe it as a non-gender-dominant society. Not much division of labor on sexual lines. All kinds of marriages—polyandry may be the most common, two or three husbands. A good many women are out of heterosexual circulation because they have homosexual group marriages, the iyeha, three or four or more women. We haven't found a male equivalent yet—"

"Anyhow," said Riel, "Aketa is one of Ket's husbands. His name means something like Ket's-kin-first-husband. Kin, meaning they're in the same volcano lineage. He was down the valley in Sponta when we first arrived."

"And he's a priest, a high one, we think. Maybe because he's Ket's husband, and she's certainly an important one. But most of the really prestigious priesthoods seem to be for men. Probably to compensate for lack of childbearing."

The anger rose up again in Shan. Who were these women to lecture him on gender and womb envy? Like a sea wave the hatred filled him with salt bitterness, and sank away, and was gone. He sat with his fragile sisters in the sunlight on the stone, and looked at the heavy, impossible book open on Forest's lap.

After a long time he said, "What does it say?"

"I only know a word here and there. Aketa wanted me to have it for a while. He's been teaching us. Mostly I look at the pictures. Like a baby." She showed him the small, brightly painted, gilded picture on

the open page: men in wonderful robes and headdresses, dancing, under the purple slopes of Iyananam.

"Dalzul thought they were preliterate," he said. "He has to see this."

"He has seen it," Riel said.

"But—" Shan began, and was silent.

"Long long ago on Terra," Riel said, "one of the first anthropologists took a man from a tiny, remote, isolated Arctic tribe to a huge city, New York City. The thing that most impressed this very intelligent tribesman about New York City were the knobs on the bottom posts of staircases. He studied them with deep interest. He wasn't interested in the vast buildings, the streets full of crowds, the machines…"

"We wonder if the churten problem centers not on impressions only, but expectations," Forest said. "We make sense of the world intentionally. Faced with chaos, we seek or make the familiar, and build up the world with it. Babies do it, we all do it; we filter out most of what our senses report. We're conscious only of what we need to be or want to be conscious of. In churten, the universe dissolves. As we come out, we reconstruct it—frantically. Grabbing at things we recognize. And once one part of it is there, the rest gets built on that."

"I say 'I,'" said Riel, "and an infinite number of sentences could follow. But the next word begins to build the immutable syntax. 'I want—' By the last word of the sentence, there may be no choice at all. And also, you can only use words you know."

"That's how we came out of the chaos experience on the *Shoby*," Shan said. His head had begun suddenly to ache, a painful, irregular throb at the temples. "We talked. We constructed the syntax of the experience. We told our story."

"And tried very hard to tell it truly," Forest said.

After a pause, pressing the pressure points on his temples, Shan said, "You're saying that Dalzul has been lying?"

"No. But is he telling the Ganam story or the Dalzul story? The childlike, simple people acclaiming him king, the beautiful princess offering herself…"

"But she did—"

"It's her job. Her vocation. She's one of these priests, an important one. Her title is Anam. Dalzul translated it princess. We think it means earth. The earth, the ground, the world. She is Ganam's earth, receiving the stranger in honor. But there's more to it—this reciprocal function, which Dalzul interprets as kingship. They simply don't have kings. It must be some kind of priesthood role as Anam's mate. Not Ket's husband, but her mate when she's Anam. But we don't know. We don't know what responsibility he's taken on."

“And we may be inventing just as much of it as Dalzul is,” Riel said. “How can we be sure?”

“If we have you back to compare notes with, it’ll be a big relief,” said Forest. “We need you.”

So does he, Shan thought. He needs my help, they need my help. What help have I to give? I don’t know where I am. I know nothing about this place. I know the stone is warm and rough under the palm of my hand.

I know these two women are sympathetic, intelligent, trying to be honest.

I know Dalzul is a great man, not a foolish egoist, not a liar.

I know the stone is rough, the sun is warm, the shadow cool. I know the slight, sweet taste of tipu seeds, the crunch between the teeth.

I know that when he was thirty, Dalzul was worshiped as God. No matter how he disavowed that worship, it must have changed him. Growing old, he would remember what it was to be a king…

“Do we know anything at all about this priesthood he’s supposed to fill, then?” he asked harshly.

“The key word seems to be ‘todok,’ stick or staff or scepter. Todoghay, the one who holds the scepter, is the title. Dalzul got that right. It does sound like a king. But we don’t think it means ruling people.”

“Day-to-day decisions are made by the councils,” Riel said. “The priests educate and lead ceremony and—keep the city in spiritual balance?”

“Sometimes, possibly, by blood sacrifice,” Forest said. “We don’t know what they’ve asked him to do! But it does seem he’d better find out.”

After a while Shan sighed. “I feel like a fool,” he said.

“Because you fell in love with Dalzul?” Forest’s black eyes gazed straight into his. “I honor you for it. But I think he needs your help.”

When he left, walking slowly, he felt Forest and Riel watch him go, felt their affectionate concern following him, staying with him.

He headed back for the big market square. We must tell our story together, he told himself. But the words were hollow.

I must listen, he thought. Not talk, not tell. Be still.

He listened as he walked in the streets of Ganam. He tried to look, to see with his eyes, to feel, to be in his own skin in this world, in this world, itself. Not his world, not Dalzul’s, or Forest’s or Riel’s, but this world as it was in its recalcitrant and irreducible earth and stone and clay, its dry bright air, its breathing bodies and thinking minds. A vendor was calling wares in a brief musical phrase, five beats, tataBANaba, and an equal pause, and the call again, sweet and

endless. A woman passed him and Shan saw her, saw her absolutely for a moment: short, with muscular arms and hands, a preoccupied look on her wide face with its thousand tiny wrinkles etched by the sun on the pottery smoothness of the skin. She strode past him, purposeful, not noticing him, and was gone. She left behind her an indubitable sense of being. Of being herself. Unconstructed, unreadable, unreachable. The other. Not his to understand.

All right then. Rough stone warm against the palm, and a five-beat measure, and a short old woman going about her business. It was a beginning.

I've been dreaming, he thought. Ever since we got here. Not a nightmare like the *Shoby*. A good dream, a sweet dream. But was it my dream or his? Following him around, seeing through his eyes, meeting Viaka and the others, being feasted, listening to the music… Learning their dances, learning to drum with them…Learning to cook…Pruning orchards…Sitting on my terrace, eating tipu seeds…A sunny dream, full of music and trees and simple companionship and peaceful solitude. My good dream, he thought, surprised and wry. No kingship, no beautiful princess, no rivals for the throne. I'm a lazy man. With lazy dreams. I need Tai to wake me up, make me vibrate, irritate me. I need my angry woman, my unforgiving friend.

Forest and Riel weren't a bad substitute. They were certainly friends, and though they forgave his laziness, they had jolted him out of it.

An odd question appeared in his mind: Does Dalzul know we're here? Apparently Forest and Riel don't exist for him as women; do I exist for him as a man?

He did not try to answer the question. My job, he thought, is to try to jolt him. To put a bit of dissonance in the harmony, to syncopate the beat. I'll ask him to dinner and talk to him, he thought.

Middle-aged, majestic, hawk-nosed, fierce-faced, Aketa was the most mild and patient of teachers. "Todokyu nkenes ebegebyu," he repeated for the fifth or sixth time, smiling.

"The scepter—something—is full of? has mastery over? represents?" said Forest.

"Is connected with—symbolizes?" said Riel.

"Kenes!" Shan said. "Electric! That's the word they kept using at the generator. Power!"

"The scepter symbolizes power?" said Forest. "Well, what a revelation. Shit!"

"Shit," Aketa repeated, evidently liking the sound of the word. "Shit!"

Shan went into mime, dancing a waterfall, imitating the motion

of wheels, the hum and buzz of the little dynamo up on the volcano. The two women stared at him as he roared, turned, hummed, buzzed, and crackled, shouting "Kenes?" at intervals like a demented chicken. But Aketa's smile broadened. "Soha, kenes," he agreed, and mimicked the leap of a spark from one fingertip to another. "Todokyu nkenes ebegebyu."

"The scepter signifies, symbolizes electricity! It must mean something like—if you take up the scepter you're the Electricity Priest—like Aketa's the Library Priest and Agot's the Calendar Priest—right?"

"It would make sense," Forest said.

"Why would they pick Dalzul straight off as their chief electrician?" Riel asked.

"Because he came out of the sky, like lightning!" said Shan.

"Did they pick him?" Forest asked.

There was a pause. Aketa looked from one to the other, alert and patient.

"What's 'choose'?" Forest asked Riel, who said, "Sotot."

Forest turned to their teacher. "Aketa: Dazu…ntodok…sotot?"

Aketa was silent for some time and then said, gravely and clearly, "Soha. Todok nDazu oyo sotot."

"'Yes. And also the scepter chooses Dalzul,'" Riel murmured.

"Aheo?" Shan demanded—why? But of Aketa's answer they could understand only a few words: priesthood or vocation, sacredness, the earth.

"Anam," Riel said—"Ket? Anam Ket?"

Aketa's pitch-black eyes met hers. Again he was silent, and the quality of his silence held them all still. When he spoke it was with sorrow. "Ai Dazu!" he said. "Ai Dazu kesemmas!"

He stood up, and knowing what was expected, they too rose, thanked him quietly for his teaching, and filed out. Obedient children, Shan thought. Good pupils. Learning what knowledge?

That evening he looked up from his practice on the little Gaman finger-drum, to which Abud liked to listen, sitting with him on the terrace, sometimes singing a soft chant when he caught a familiar beat.

"Abud," he said, "metu?"—a word?

Abud, who had got used to the inquiry in the last few days, said, "Soha." He was a humorless, even-natured young man; he tolerated all Shan's peculiarities, perhaps, Shan thought, because he really hardly noticed them.

"'Kesemmas,'" Shan said.

"Ah," said Abud, and repeated the word, and then went off slowly

and relentlessly into the incomprehensible. Shan had learned to watch him rather than trying to catch the words. He listened to the tone, saw the gestures, the expressions. The earth, down, low, digging? The Gaman buried their dead. Dead, death? He mimed dying, a corpse; but Abud never understood his charades, and stared blankly. Shan gave up, and pattered out the dance rhythm of yesterday's festival on the drum. "Soha, soha," said Abud.

"I've never actually spoken to Ket," Shan said to Dalzul.

It had been a good dinner. He had cooked it, with considerable assistance from Abud, who had prevented him just in time from frying the fezuni. Eaten raw, dipped in fiery pepperjuice, the fezuni had been delicious. Abud had eaten with them, respectfully silent as he always was in Dalzul's presence, and then excused himself. Shan and Dalzul were now nibbling tipu seeds and drinking nut beer, sitting on little carpets on the terrace in the purple twilight, watching the stars slowly clot the sky with brilliance.

"All men except the chosen king are taboo to her," Dalzul said.

"But she's married," Shan said—"isn't she?"

"No, no. The princess must remain virgin until the king is chosen. Then she belongs only to him. The sacred marriage, the hierogamy."

"They do practice polyandry," Shan said uncertainly.

"Her union with him is probably the fundamental event of the kingship ceremonial. Neither has any real choice in the matter. That's why her defection is so troubling. She's breaking her own society's rules." Dalzul took a long draft of beer. "What made me their choice in the first place—my dramatic appearance out of the sky—may be working against me now. I broke the rules by going away, and then coming back, and not coming back alone. One supernatural person pops out of the sky, all right, but four of them, male and female, all eating and drinking and shitting like everybody else, and asking stupid questions in baby talk all the time? We aren't behaving in a properly sacred manner. And they respond by impropriety of the same order, rule-breaking. Primitive worldviews are rigid, they break when strained. We're having a disintegrative effect on this society. And I am responsible."

Shan took a breath. "It isn't your world, sir," he said. "It's theirs. They're responsible for it." He cleared his throat. "And they don't seem all that primitive—they make steel, their grasp of the principles of electricity is impressive—and they are literate, and the social system seems to be very flexible and stable, if what Forest and—"

"I still call her the princess, but as I learn the language better I've realized that that's inaccurate," Dalzul said, setting down his cup and speaking musingly. "Queen is probably nearer: queen of Ganam, of the

Gaman. She is identified as Ganam, as the soil of the planet itself."

"Yes," Shan said. "Riel says—"

"So that in a sense she is the Earth. As, in a sense, I am Space, the sky. Coming alone to this world, a conjunction. A mystic union: fire and air with soil and water. The old mythologies enacted yet again in living flesh. She cannot turn away from me. It dislocates the very order of things. The father and the mother are joined, their children are obedient, happy, secure. But if the mother rebels, disorder, distress, failure ensue. These responsibilities are absolute. We don't choose them. They choose us. She must be brought back to her duty to her people."

"As Forest and Riel understand it, she's been married to Aketa for several years, and her second husband is the father of her daughter." Shan heard the harshness of his voice; his mouth was dry and his heart pounding as if he was afraid, of what? of being disobedient?

"Viaka says he can bring her back to the palace," Dalzul said, "but at risk of retaliation from the pretender's faction."

"Dalzul!" Shan said. "Ket is a married woman! She went back to her family. Her duty to you as Earth Priestess or whatever it is is done. Aketa is her husband, not your rival. He doesn't want the scepter, the crown, whatever it is!"

Dalzul made no reply and his expression was unreadable in the deepening twilight.

Shan went on, desperately: "Until we understand this society better, maybe you should hold back—certainly not let Viaka kidnap Ket—"

"I'm glad you see that," Dalzul said. "Although I can't help my involvement, we certainly must try not to interfere with these people's belief systems. Power is responsibility, alas! Well, I should be off. Thank you for a very pleasant evening, Shan. We can still sing a tune together, eh, shipmates?" He stood up and patted the air on the back, saying, "Good night, Forest; good night, Riel," before he patted Shan on the back and said, "Good night and thanks, Shan!" He strode out of the courtyard, a lithe, erect figure, a white glimmer in the starlit dark.

"I think we've got to get him onto the ship, Forest. He's increasingly delusional." Shan squeezed his hands together till the knuckles cracked. "I think he's delusional. Maybe I am. But you and Riel and I, we seem to be in the same general reality—fiction—are we?"

Forest nodded grimly. "Increasingly so," she said. "And if kesemmas does mean dying, or murder—Riel thinks it's murder, it involves violence…I have this horrible vision of poor Dalzul committing some awful ritual sacrifice, cutting somebody's throat

while convinced that he's pouring out oil or cutting cloth or something harmless. I'd be glad to get him out of this! I'd be glad to get out myself. But how?"

"Surely if the three of us—"

"Reason with him?" Forest asked, sardonic.

When they went to what he called the palace, they had to wait a long time to see Dalzul. Old Viaka, anxious and nervous, tried to send them away, but they waited. Dalzul came out into his courtyard at last and greeted Shan. He did not acknowledge or did not perceive Riel and Forest. If he was acting, it was a consummate performance; he moved without awareness of their physical presence and talked through their speech. When at last Shan said, "Forest and Riel are here, Dalzul—here—look at them!"—Dalzul looked where he gestured and then looked back at Shan with such shocked compassion that Shan lost his own bearings and turned to see if the women were still there.

Dalzul, watching him, spoke very gently: "It's about time we went back, Shan."

"Yes—Yes, I think so—I think we ought to." Tears of pity, relief, shame jammed in Shan's throat for a moment. "We should go back. It isn't working."

"Very soon," Dalzul said, "very soon now. Don't worry, Shan. Anxiety increases the perceptual anomalies. Just take it easy, as you did at first, and remember that you've done nothing wrong. As soon as the coronation has—"

"No! We should go now—"

"Shan, whether I asked for it or not, I have an obligation here, and I will fulfill it. If I run out on them, Aketa's faction will have their swords out—"

"Aketa doesn't have a sword," Riel said, her voice high and loud as Shan had never heard it. "These people don't have swords, they don't make them!"

Dalzul talked on through her voice: "As soon as the ceremony is over and the kingship is filled, we'll go. After all, I can go and be back within an hour, if need be. I'll take you back to Ve Port. In no time at all, as the joke is. So stop worrying about what never was your problem. I got you into this. It's my responsibility."

"How can—" Shan began, but Forest's long, black hand was on his arm.

"Don't try, Shan," she said. "The mad reason much better than the sane. Come on. This is very hard to take."

Dalzul was turning serenely away, as if they had left him already.

"Either we have to wait for this ceremony with him," Forest said

as they went out into the hot, bright street, “or we knock him on the head and stick him in the ship.”

“I’d *like* to knock him on the head,” Riel said.

“If we do get him onto the ship,” Shan said, “how do we know he’ll take us back to Ve? And if he turns round and comes right back, how do we know what he’ll do? He could destroy Ganam instead of saving it—”

“Shan!” Riel said, “Stop it! Is Ganam a world? Is Dalzul a god?”

He stared at her. A couple of women going by looked at them, and one nodded a greeting, “Ha, Foyes! Ha, Yeh!”

“Ha, Tasasap!” Forest said to her, while Riel, her eyes blazing, faced Shan: “Ganam is one little city-state on a large planet, which the Gaman call Anam, and the people in the next valley call something else entirely. We’ve seen one tiny comer of it. It’ll take us years to know anything about it. Dalzul, because he’s crazy or because churtening made him crazy or made us all crazy, I don’t know which, I don’t care just now—Dalzul barged in and got mixed up in sacred stuff and maybe is causing some trouble and confusion. But these people *live* here. This is their place. One man can’t destroy them and one man can’t save them! They have their own story, and *they’re* telling it! How we’ll figure in it I don’t know—maybe as some idiots that fell out of the sky once!”

Forest put a peaceable arm around Riel’s shoulders. “When she gets excited she gets excited. Come on, Shan. Aketa certainly isn’t planning to slaughter Viaka’s household. I don’t see these people letting us mess up anything in a big way. They’re in control. We’ll go through this ceremony. It probably isn’t a big deal, except in Dalzul’s mind. And as soon as it’s over and his mind’s at rest, ask him to take us home. He’ll do it. He’s—” She paused. “He’s fatherly,” she said, without sarcasm.

They did not see Dalzul again until the day of the ceremony. He stayed holed up in his palace, and Viaka sternly forbade them entrance. Aketa evidently had no power to interfere in another sacred jurisdiction, and no wish to. “Tezyeme,” he said, which meant something on the order of “it is happening the way it is supposed to happen.” He did not look happy about it, but he was not going to interfere.

On the morning of the Ceremony of the Scepter, there was no buying and selling in the marketplace. People came out in their finest kilts and gorgeous vests; all the men of the priesthoods wore the high, plumed, basketry headdresses and massive gold earrings. Babies’ and children’s heads were rubbed with red ocher. But it was not a festivity, such as the Star-Rising ceremony of a few days earlier;

nobody danced, nobody cooked tipu-bread, there was no music. Only a large, rather subdued crowd kept gathering in the marketplace. At last the doors of Aketa's house—Ket's house, actually, Riel reminded them—swung open, and a procession came forth, walking to the complex, thrilling, somber beat of drams. The drummers had been waiting in the streets behind the house, and came forward to walk behind the procession. The whole city seemed to shake to the steady, heavy rhythms.

Shan had never seen Ket except on the ship's tape of Dalzul's first arrival, but he recognized her at once in the procession: a stem, splendid woman. She wore a headdress less elaborate than most of the men's, but ornate with gold, balancing it proudly as she walked. Beside her walked Aketa, red plumes nodding above his wicker crown, and another man to her left—"Ketketa, second husband," Riel murmured. "That's their daughter." The child was four or five, very dignified, pacing along with her parents, her dark hair rough and red with ocher. "All the priests in Ket's volcano lineage are here," Riel went on. "There's the Earth-Turner. That old one, that's the Calendar Priest. There's a lot of them I don't know. This is a *big* ceremony…" Her whisper was a little shaky.

The procession turned left out of the marketplace and moved on to the heavy beating of the drums until Ket came abreast of the main entrance of Viaka's rambling, yellow-walled house. There, with no visible signal, everyone stopped walking at once. The drums maintained the heavy, complex beat; but one by one they dropped out, till one throbbed alone like a heart and then stopped, leaving a terrifying silence.

A man with a towering headdress of woven feathers stepped forward and called out a summons: "Sem ayatan! Sem Dazu!"

The door opened slowly. Dalzul stood framed in the sunlit doorway, darkness behind him. He wore his black-and-silver uniform. His hair shone silver.

In the absolute silence of the crowd, Ket walked forward to face him. She knelt down on both knees, bowed her head, and said, "Dazu, sototiyu!"

"'Dalzul, you chose,'" Riel whispered.

Dalzul smiled. He stepped forward and reached out his hands to lift Ket to her feet.

A whisper ran like wind in the crowd, a hiss or gasp or sigh of shock. Ket's gold-burdened head came up, startled, then she was on her feet, fiercely erect, her hands at her sides. "Sototiyu!" she said, and turned, and strode back to her husbands.

The drums took up a soft patter, a rain sound.

A gap opened in the procession just in front of the door of the

house. Quiet and self-possessed, walking with great dignity, Dalzul came forward and took the place left open for him. The rain sound of the drums grew louder, turning to thunder, thunder rolling near and far, loud and low. With the perfect unanimity of a school of fish or flock of birds the procession moved forward.

The people of the city followed, Shan, Riel, and Forest among them.

"Where are they going?" Forest said as they left the last street and struck out on the narrow road between the orchards.

"This road goes up Iyananam," Shan said.

"Onto the volcano? Maybe that's where the ritual will be."

The drums beat, the sunlight beat, Shan's heart beat, his feet struck the dust of the road, all in one huge pulse. Entrained, Thought and speech lost in the one great beat, beat, beat.

The procession had halted. The followers were stopping. The three Terrans kept on until they came up alongside the procession itself. It was re-forming, the drummers drawing off to one side, a few of them softly playing the thunder roll. Some of the crowd, people with children, were beginning to go back down the steep trail beside the mountain stream. Nobody spoke, and the noise of the waterfall uphill from them and the noisy torrent nearby almost drowned out the drums.

They were a hundred paces or so downhill from the little stone building that housed the dynamo. The plumed priests, Ket and her husbands and household, all had drawn aside, leaving the way clear to the bank of the stream. Stone steps were built down right to the water, and at their foot lay a terrace, paved with light-colored stone, over which the clear water washed in quick-moving, shallow sheets. Amidst the shine and motion of the water stood an altar or low pedestal, blinding bright in the noon sun: gilt or solid gold, carved and drawn into intricate and fantastic figures of crowned men, dancing men, men with diamond eyes. On the pedestal lay a wand, not gold, unornamented, of dark wood or tarnished metal.

Dalzul began to walk towards the pedestal.

Aketa stepped forward suddenly and stood at the head of the stone steps, blocking Dalzul's way. He spoke in a ringing voice, a few words. Riel shook her head, not understanding. Dalzul stood silent, motionless, and made no reply. When Aketa fell silent, Dalzul strode straight forward, as if to walk through him.

Aketa held his ground. He pointed to Dalzul's feet. "Tediad!" he said sharply—"'Shoes,'" Riel murmured. Aketa and all the Gaman in the procession were barefoot. After a moment, with no loss of dignity, Dalzul knelt, took off his shoes and stockings, set them aside, and stood up, barefoot in his black uniform.

“Stand aside now,” he said quietly, and, as if understanding him, Aketa stepped back among the watchers.

“Ai Dazu,” he said as Dalzul passed him, and Ket said softly, “Ai Dazu!” The soft murmur followed Dalzul as he paced down the steps and out onto the terrace, walking through the shallow water that broke in bright drops around his ankles. Unhesitating, he walked to the pedestal and around it, so that he faced the procession and the watching people. He smiled, and put out his hand, and seized the scepter.

“No,” Shan said. “No, we had no spy-eye with us. Yes, he died instantly. No, I have no idea what voltage. Underground wires from the generator, we assume. Yes, of course it was deliberate, intentional, arranged. They thought he had chosen that death. He chose it when he chose to have sex with Ket, with the Earth Priestess, with the Earth. They thought he knew; how could they know he didn’t know? If you lie with the Earth, you die by the Lightning. Men come from a long way to Ganam for that death. Dalzul came from a very long way. No, we none of us understood. No, I don’t know if it had anything to do with the churten effect, with perceptual dissonance, with chaos. We came to see things differently, but which of us knew the truth? He knew he had to be a god again.”